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## CONTENTS

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Signs of the Times	Page 1
From our Mail Bag	Page 10
Bible Teaching About...	Page 13
Bible Prophecy	Page 21

*Cover picture: Sunset over the Masai Mara in Kenya*

*Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version except where another version is indicated after the text.*

# Signs of the Times

THE Bible gives us many indicators or signs which point the way to events in the future. You may have heard the expression '*it's a sign of the times*'. People use this loosely to describe a great event – maybe a disaster like the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 now known as 9/11. The expression is used in the New Testament in a very special way. Jesus used it when talking to the religious leaders of the Jews. They came to him with a request asking him to show them a sign from heaven. What was his answer?

“...When it is evening you say, ‘*It will be* fair weather, for the sky is red’; and in the morning, ‘*It will be* foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times”

[Matthew 16.2,3].

## THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET JONAH

This Biblical saying has even come into our language – by looking at the sky we can get an indication of the weather. Many people today are like those leaders of the Jews who failed to discern the signs in the world around them – signs that indicated the coming of national disaster. Jesus did give them a sign which he referred to as the sign of the prophet Jonah:

‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’

[Matthew 12.39, 40]

The sign of the prophet Jonah was a lesson to that generation that the prophet they were looking for, their Messiah, was in their midst. They failed to recognise him and eventually they rejected him and put him to death. However, just as Jonah came out of that watery grave, God had promised to raise His Son on the third day. The significance of that sign was totally lost on those religious leaders. They were, as Jesus described them, '*blind leaders of the blind*'.

#### ANOTHER SIGN

Another example of Jesus giving a sign is found in Matthew chapter 24, where we read how Jesus surprised his disciples with some prophetic words concerning the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.



*Model of Herod's temple in Jerusalem*

The disciples proudly wanted to show him this magnificent structure which had been built by King Herod, but Jesus was not impressed and told them that the temple would be razed to the ground. Like those religious leaders, even his disciples failed to discern the signs of the times and we can imagine their amazement on hearing his words.

Later, as they sat on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem and pondered on what he had said, they asked him about it again. '*Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?*' [Matthew 24.3]

#### THE MOUNT OLIVET PROPHECY

Jesus answered these two questions in great detail – his teaching

here is sometimes called the Mount Olivet prophecy. The parallel record in Luke 21 gives some further details and by comparing Matthew with Luke we get a fuller picture of the message that Jesus gave to his disciples. The Mount Olivet prophecy is really in two parts - firstly it concerns the destruction of Jerusalem and the magnificent temple which the disciples had been admiring. This took place not many years later when the Roman armies under Titus came and destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. Secondly, the prophecy concerns '*the signs of your (Christ's) coming and of the end of the age*'.

The Bible does not teach that the world will literally be destroyed, only that the present order of things will come to an end at the return of Christ. The word translated '*world*' in the King James version is from a Greek word '*aion*' which literally means a set time period or age and is more correctly translated '*age*' in the New King James version. Jesus meant that there will be great changes in the world when he returns – sometimes called in the Bible '*the last days*' or '*the time of the end*'. This will result in a new order of things which the Bible describes as a '*new heavens and a new earth*'.

If you carefully read Matthew chapter 24 you will notice a number of different signs that Jesus mentioned to the disciples. It's also worth comparing Matthew's account with the parallel accounts in Mark chapter 13 and Luke chapter 21. A summary of the signs given by Jesus is as follows:

- ❖ wars and rumours of wars
- ❖ famines
- ❖ pestilences
- ❖ earthquakes
- ❖ false Christ's and false prophets
- ❖ lawlessness
- ❖ Jerusalem trodden down until...
- ❖ Sun, moon and stars
- ❖ distress of nations with perplexity

- ❖ men's hearts failing them for fear
- ❖ like the days of Noah

'AS THE DAYS OF NOAH WERE...'

All these signs have a remarkable relevance to the times in which we live. In this article we wish to focus on one particular aspect, the last one on this list. Jesus said to his disciples:

'But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be'.

[Matthew 24.37-39]

Noah lived some 4,500 years ago and we read about him in the first book of the Bible. But what was so wrong with the days of Noah? Jesus tells us that they were '*eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage*' There's nothing unusual about that – it's the history of the human race. But we need to investigate further – why did Jesus draw attention to the times of Noah? In Genesis chapter six there is a description of what it was really like in the days of Noah:

'Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD' [Genesis 6.5-8].

Note these words – only one man found grace, the rest were evil

and there was no remedy. That was not all, for verse 11 tells us that '*the earth was corrupt before God and the earth was filled with violence*'. This description of the world of Noah's day has a familiar ring to it, it's just like our world today. But what happened – did it continue? In the New Testament, the Apostle Peter reminded his readers that the ancient world came to a sudden and catastrophic end:

'For if God...did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly... then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgement' [2 Peter 2.4,5,9].

#### THE TIMES OF NOAH – A LESSON FOR TODAY

Many people who call themselves Christians, treat the book of Genesis as a story book, a mixture of truth and myth without much relevance in our modern world. But the teaching of Jesus and his Apostles endorses these early Biblical records and they cannot therefore be swept aside so easily. Violence and moral decay was a sign of the times in Noah's day and the end result was complete destruction; the slate was wiped clean as it were. The world of the ungodly vanished in the flood, only Noah and his family were saved, and a fresh start was made. Jesus is telling us that it will be just like that when he returns; the world of the ungodly will be destroyed (not by a flood, because God promised that would never happen again) but there will be a fresh start.

What happened after the flood? Were things any better? They were for a while but it was not long before moral decay set in again in the postdiluvian world and it has got steadily worse ever since. When we get to the time of Christ, the Roman world was steeped in cruelty, violence and immorality and totally decadent, which was one of the major contributing factors to the eventual break-up of the largest

The lesson for you and for me is to observe the signs of the times and to prepare for the coming of Jesus, as he said to his disciples: '*Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the son of man cometh*' [Matthew 24.44]. The Apostle Peter really sums this up by drawing our attention to the malaise which describes the world in which we live:

'knowing this first: that scoffers will come in **the last days**, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as *they were* from the beginning of creation"' [2 Peter 3.3, 4].

Note the reference to '**the last days**' again, which pinpoints the time referred to by the Apostle. If you were to go out into the streets of central London or any other large city with a placard giving a message about imminent Divine intervention, what sort of reaction would you get? verbal or possibly physical abuse? ridicule? laughter? Perhaps the same sort of reaction as the people of New York might have given just before those horrifying events on 11 September 2001.

#### 'NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH'

However, this is what it will be like - the Scriptures do not hide the reality and the severity of the judgements which are coming on an unsuspecting world. In this chapter the Apostle Peter compares the days of Noah with our own times (see 2 Peter 3.5-7). The graphic description by Peter of this time when God will intervene, continues in the following verses. This passage seems to indicate that the earth will be burned up by fire and become uninhabitable. But this is not God's intention as we learn from so many other prophetic passages. Fire is a symbol of divine judgement and we learn from the Scriptures that God will cleanse the earth of its wickedness by fire (see for example Malachi 4.1 and 2 Thessalonians 1.7-9).

The heavens and earth are often used in Scripture to indicate the rulers and the common people and this is what Peter is telling us here. The old order, human rule and human ideals will be gone for ever and in their place a new order will be established: '*Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells'* [2 Peter 3.13].

If we observe the signs and recognise their meaning – what next? We can close our minds to these things and do nothing. This will be the response of the majority of men and women who will experience that thief-like second advent of Christ and then it will be too late to do anything. On the other hand we can respond to God's gracious offer of salvation for as Peter tells us '*The Lord...is not willing that any should perish*'. After giving the Mount Olivet prophecy which we have referred to, Jesus said some very important words to his disciples: '*...when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near!*' [Luke 21.31].

As we go forward into a new year, will you dear reader, be able to share the confidence that Jesus gave to his immediate followers? Will you like them, follow him in the way he has shown us by his example and teaching? Will you prepare now for the time of great change which will suddenly come upon an unsuspecting world?

Editor



## **From our Mail Bag**

---

**F**OR the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law' [Hebrews 7.12 NIV]. A reader has asked the question – 'which law was changed and what are the implications of this change for those who want to obey God's word today?'

Firstly, with any verse in Scripture we need to try to understand the argument being put forward in the narrative to see the verse in context. In my NIV Bible the heading to this section is '*Jesus like Melchizedek*'. In the preceding verses the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, sets out just how great Melchizedek was as the king of Jerusalem. At the same time he was High Priest to God and even the great patriarch Abraham conceded his higher position [*Hebrews 7.1-10*].

We read in Genesis chapter 14 how Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe or a share of what he had taken as spoil, following his pursuit of a northern confederacy of kings who had ventured south and taken his nephew Lot captive [*Genesis 14.18-20*]. It was on his return after the battle that Abraham came to Jerusalem and Melchizedek came out and blessed him. Abraham had been given amazing promises by God and thereby had a special place in God's purpose with the earth.

Right from these early times then, we see that to approach God acceptably, there was the need for someone to be in a position to stand between the people and the Almighty. Whilst Melchizedek was obviously chosen to fulfill this role it was not through a selected line of birthright and it is in this context that he is described as being '*without*

*father or mother; without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the son of God' [Hebrews 7.3]. We see here a parallel being made between the high priest Melchizedek and Jesus because neither took their position of intermediary through an automatic family genealogy.*

We note that with these two men it was quite different to the Levitical priesthood set up later under the Law given through Moses. The descendants of Levi automatically took the role of the priests to represent the people and have interface with God on their behalf, as stated in Hebrews chapter 7 '*Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests...' [Hebrews 7.5 NIV]*. The Law was introduced to reinforce the fact that all the people without exception were sinners. They were subject to the Law's condemnation, and therefore they were in need of a priestly system to mediate between themselves and God.

The question is then raised in verse 11 that if the law was instituted through the Levitical priesthood why was there still a need for another priest to come who was not a Levite? *[Hebrews 7.11]* Jesus, the son of God was, through his mother Mary, from the tribe of Judah and therefore this constituted an important change; for he became a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.

We read that through his perfect life which no one else could achieve, Jesus actually fulfilled the law. For that reason the grave could not hold him and he was raised from the dead and given immortality. He is now the High Priest for all who truly follow him and therefore we are instructed to pray to the Father through him, as our mediator. This was an important change as noted in the last verse of Hebrews 7: '*For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect for ever' [Hebrews 7.28 NIV].*

The implication therefore following this change is that believers in

Christ are not bound by the Law given through Moses with all its sacrificial rites and regulations, but by the commandments of Christ. This ‘Law of Christ’ instructs us how we should live our lives in the knowledge that we have a very special High Priest. He understands our human nature and can intercede for us when we recognise our sins and approach God in prayer for forgiveness. What a privilege this is for believers, as we read again in Hebrews:

‘For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need’ [*Hebrews 4.15,16 NIV*].

Correspondence Secretary

## FREE BIBLE COURSE

The Bible Correspondence Course is in two parts. The first part gives a basic outline of what the Bible contains and its message. The second part is a more detailed study of the important Bible teaching concerning God’s plan of salvation and the Christian way of life. The course is free of charge and the first lesson can be obtained by writing to:

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# Bible Teaching About...

## The Devil and Satan

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WHEN writing to the early Christians, the Apostle John summed up the mission of Jesus in these words:

‘... For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil’ [*1 John 3.8*].

The Apostle Paul wrote similar words saying that Jesus died to ‘*destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil*’ [*Hebrews 2.14*].

These Bible quotations show how important it is that we understand what the Bible means when it refers to the devil. We cannot even begin to appreciate Jesus’ great work of salvation unless we know what is meant by the devil he came to destroy.

### OUR ENEMY

In the Bible, the devil is presented to us as the enemy of mankind. For example, Peter warned the believers of the first century: ‘*Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*’ [*1 Peter 5.8*]. Paul also appealed to them to ‘*Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil*’ [*Ephesians 6.11*]. The devil is a reality – a power to be reckoned with. It is obviously important that we understand who or what this power is.

You may immediately think that the devil is an evil spirit being – an angel who has rebelled against God and whose aim now is to hold men and women in his power and turn them against God. This is the

concept of the devil taught for centuries in the name of Christianity. Some still hold to those beliefs and claim to base them on the Bible. Others have rejected these ideas but have failed to put a correct understanding in their place.

In this article we hope to show that the Bible knows nothing of a supernatural monster of evil, but uses the word ‘devil’ and also the word ‘satan’ to describe that characteristic of human nature which leads us to rebel against God and His laws. This is responsible, directly or indirectly, for all the ills of mankind including death. The Apostle Paul described in graphic words his personal experience of this inborn characteristic:

‘I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the person who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members’ [*Romans 7.21-23*].

We are going to suggest that this ‘*law of sin which is in my members*’ is in fact the Bible devil. Elsewhere it is described as ‘*the carnal mind*’ which is ‘*enmity against God*’ [*Romans 8.7*].

#### A BRIEF STUDY OF WORDS

The word ‘*devil*’ as used in the New Testament is derived from a Greek word ‘*diabolos*’. It means literally to ‘*dart*’ or ‘*strike through*’. An accurate translation would be ‘*slanderer*’ or ‘*false accuser*’ and it has been so translated occasionally in the New Testament (For example the word ‘*diabolos*’ is translated ‘*slanderer*’ in *1 Timothy 3.11*). On all other occasions it is translated as ‘*devil*’ and we can only decide what it refers to by looking at the immediate context and the general teaching of the Bible. There is another Greek word used in the New Testament and translated ‘*devils*’ in the Authorised Version. This would be better

rendered as ‘demons’ as in more recent translations. However this does not come within the scope of our present consideration.

The devil is often identified with satan. Here we have another word which is not an English word at all. It has been taken into the English language from the original Hebrew of the Old Testament. It simply means ‘adversary’ and there are a number of examples of it being translated in this way (see for example 1 Kings 11.23 and Psalm 38.20).

It is important to note that, apart from the first two chapters of the book of Job, there are only three references to satan in the whole of the Old Testament and no references to the devil. This is very remarkable if this devil or satan is really an angel who fell from grace in the very beginning and who has since been responsible for all the evil in the world. The word ‘*devils*’ is found four times in the King James version of the old Testament but comes from a different Hebrew word. It clearly refers to the false gods or idols to whom Israel turned (see for example Deuteronomy 32.15-17).

### THE WORK OF JESUS

Having said this, the fact remains that in the Bible both titles, the ‘devil’ and ‘satan’, are frequently used of one particular power, a power which is the enemy of God and man. This is directly responsible for all the sin and wickedness in the world; what we might call the moral evil. This power is also held to be responsible – directly or indirectly – for physical evil, suffering and death. So who or what is this power?

Look again at those words quoted at the beginning of this article. Jesus came *‘that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil’* [Hebrews 2.14]. This statement establishes three very important facts:

- ❖ The devil has the power of death.
- ❖ Jesus came to destroy the power.
- ❖ Jesus achieved this great victory through his own death.

From other parts of the Bible it is very easy to find out what has the power of death, and what it is that Jesus came to destroy. Consider these Biblical statements:

‘... through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin’ [*Romans 5.12*].

‘...the wages of sin is death ...’ [*Romans 6.23*].

‘...sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.’

[*James 1.15*]

These statements tell us that sin has the power of death, and death is the consequence of sin. Christ came to destroy the power of sin. His death on the cross was the means by which he achieved this. Consider these New Testament passages:

‘... he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.’

[*Hebrews 9.26 NIV*]

‘who himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree ...’

[*1 Peter 2.24*]

‘...Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ [*John 1.29*].

By his death on the cross, Jesus put away sin, the cause of death. This is the way in which he destroyed ‘him who had the power of death, that is, the devil’ [*Hebrews 2.14*].

You might be forgiven for asking the question – if the devil is the powerful angelic being which some imagine him to be, how could the death of a righteous man destroy him? If, on the other hand, the devil is that strong impulse to sin which exists in every one of us, ‘the carnal mind’, then it is not so difficult to see that Jesus himself

overcame that mind completely and ‘committed no sin’ [1 Peter 2.22]. As a result of his overcoming the power of sin, he opened up a way of hope for mankind to be delivered from sin and death.

### THE ORIGIN OF SIN

To understand more about the devil we need to know more about sin. What is sin? How did it originate? One thing stands out very clearly in the Bible. The first man Adam was responsible for introducing sin into the world; mankind must take full responsibility for maintaining it.

‘...through **one man** sin entered the world...’

*[Romans 5.12].*

Here is the origin of sin. How is it kept in being?

‘...each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death’ *[James 1.14,15 NIV]*.

‘...from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders... All these evil things come from within and defile a man’ *[Mark 7.21-23]*.

Our own experience agrees with such statements. We need no external tempter; our own hearts and minds, our own desires are more than sufficient to lead us into sin. We saw earlier that the Apostle Paul was aware of a tremendous conflict going on, not between himself and an evil being, but between the law of God which he wanted to keep and a powerful inclination within himself to disobey that law.

It is worth emphasizing that, in the first ten chapters of his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul deals exhaustively with sin, its origin, its effect on mankind, the mission of Christ to overcome it and the results

of his great victory. Yet there is not one reference to the ‘devil’ or to ‘satan’. The whole emphasis is on ‘*sin that dwells in me*’, [Romans 7.20] and ‘*the carnal mind*’ [Romans 8.7].

Here then is a great power operating in the minds of all men and women, a great adversary, a slanderer, a deceiver. It is part of their very nature and they are powerless to overcome it. ‘...*There is no one righteous, no, not one*’ [Romans 3.10].

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that, throughout the Bible, full responsibility for sin and its consequences is placed fairly and squarely on man’s shoulders. Thus the Old Testament is full of allusions to the sins of God’s people, the Jews and their consequent sufferings. Nowhere are these attributed to any external power. ‘*Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart...*’ [Jeremiah 7.24]. Their sufferings came from God as a punishment for their sins: ‘*Shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?*’ [Amos 3.6 KJV]

#### THE SERPENT IN EDEN

There would appear to be one exception to this general rule that all temptation to sin arises from within our own hearts and minds. We refer to the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Here truly was an external tempter, a deceiver, the serpent. As Eve explained when God challenged her: ‘...*The serpent deceived me, and I ate*’ [Genesis 3.13 NIV]. Who or what was this serpent? Was it an incarnation of an evil spirit being?

There is not the slightest evidence that it was. Throughout the Bible account of what happened in Eden, the serpent is treated simply as an animal, as the record states, a ‘*beast of the field which the LORD God had made*’ [Genesis 3.1]. All we are told about it is that it was more cunning than any other creature and that it had the power of speech. The only difference between the serpent and the other creatures was

that it had greater reasoning power and was able to express itself in words which were intelligible to the woman.

It might be asked, why did God introduce such a creature into the garden, knowing that it would tempt the woman to disobey Him? The answer is that Adam and Eve had to be tested. They were not created to be mere robots; they had to learn to use their free-will to the glory of their Creator and not merely to gratify their own desires. The suggestion that disobedience might be to their advantage came from a creature with no moral sense or responsibility. Adam and Eve failed the test. They sowed the seeds of rebellion against God. The temptation which came originally from the serpent, now comes from within ourselves from our '*carnal mind*', or, as the Apostle John describes it in his first letter, '*the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life*' [*I John 2.16*].

### THE BOOK OF REVELATION

It is for this reason that in the last book of the Bible, the 'devil' and 'satan' are associated with the serpent. There can be no doubt that many of the traditional beliefs about the devil have been derived from just three verses in the twelfth chapter of the book of Revelation [*Revelation 12.7-9*]. Reading those verses as a piece of literal history would seem to provide a basis for the idea that the devil is a fallen angel. But these words were never meant to be taken literally.

The opening verses of the book of Revelation tell us that it was designed primarily to show to God's servants things which were to happen after the days of the Apostle John, and to do this in language which was highly figurative [*Revelation 1.1-3; 4.1*]. You have only to read the whole of chapter twelve, to see that none of it can possibly be a literal description of events which actually happened thousands of years ago.

The book of Revelation describes in highly figurative language, a conflict between the true servants of God and the power of sin,

variously represented by ferocious beasts and other symbols. In many cases these refer to governments and ecclesiastical authorities which, down the centuries, have persecuted God's servants. These powers became '*the false accuser*' (devil) and '*adversary*' (satan) of the true church. For example, when the early church was warned '*the devil is about to throw some of you into prison*,' [Revelation 2.10] this could only have been a reference to the Roman authorities. Peter's reference to '*your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*' [1 Peter 5.8] may well have included the Jewish authorities. This was exactly how the Apostle Paul behaved before his conversion to Christianity.

In all such powers we see outward manifestations of those evil qualities which are inherent in our natures: '*greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly*' [Mark 7.22 NIV]. To find this great deceiver we do not need to go outside our own hearts and minds. '*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?*' [Jeremiah 17.9]

### THE WORK OF JESUS

The human mind is the devil we all have to fight against. Yet we lack the power to overcome the '*carnal mind*' completely. So we come back to the work of Jesus. He '*was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin*' [Hebrews 4.15]. He overcame the devil within himself completely and now enjoys a perfect life, free from all temptation. He has overcome sin and death.

Through belief and baptism you too can be associated with Christ and his great work of salvation. You can share in his victory and look forward to the day when these sin stricken bodies will be transformed and no longer subject to sin and death.

Are you prepared to associate yourself with Christ's great victory over sin and death?

Eric Toms  
Norfolk, UK

# An Introduction to Bible Prophecy

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IF you check a dictionary for the meaning of the word ‘prophecy’ you may find something like *‘prediction of future events’* but this covers a wide variety of predictions. Many people attempt to predict the future and they are either hopelessly wrong or so vague that it is difficult to be sure, even if the prediction did come true.

For prophecy to be significant, it has to be specific, unlikely to happen, or unlikely to happen at the precise time it is needed. If any such prediction does come true, then the next prediction from the same source, can be trusted and this would indicate something special is happening. It would prove that these predictions about the future are not of human origin but are from God. This is exactly what we find in the Bible – a proven track record of predictions that have come true and further prophetic statements yet to be fulfilled, that we can be sure will come true.

## PROPHECY IN THE BIBLE

There are books in the Bible that are referred to as ‘the prophets’. ‘The Major Prophets’ are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel due to the size and importance of the books they were inspired to write by God. The other twelve books from Hosea to Malachi at the end of the Old Testament are called ‘The Minor Prophets’. Prophetic statements are not restricted to these books but can be found in most of the Books of the Bible.

One of the earliest recognizable prophecies is in the very first book

resurrection, but this was hidden from his disciples at the time and only understood after the events took place. These events were also the subject of predictions by the Old Testament prophets (see for example Isaiah chapter 53 which was written some 700 years before the event).

For even longer term prophecy, Jesus preached the gospel message about the coming kingdom of God on Earth which is still in the future. Jesus used the phrase '*The Kingdom of heaven is like ...*' 10 times in the Gospel record of Matthew. Jesus talked about many aspects of the Kingdom in parable form and in answering questions:

- ❖ Entry into the Kingdom of God on earth will be preceded by the judgment and Jesus will be the judge [*Matthew 25.31-33*].
- ❖ The hope of the Kingdom should grow and dominate our lives like the man finding hidden treasure [*Matthew 12.44*].
- ❖ The Judgment will be a surprise to many people and those who are not approved by Christ will suffer bitter disappointment and rejection [*Matthew 25.41-45*].
- ❖ We will be judged on our conduct and what we have done with our talents and resources [*Matthew 25.14-30*].

These prophecies remind us that Jesus had the Holy Spirit so that with this power he could predict short term, medium term and even long term events. Jesus fully understood God's plan with the world and his own vital role in it. Jesus' simple and straightforward words about the Kingdom give us a great insight into what the Kingdom will be like and how believers can get there.

#### COMPARING THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

Generally speaking, the Old Testament prophecies concern the nation of Israel (the blessings for following God's laws and the curses

for disobedience – lessons that can be applied to us individually too). There are prophecies about other nations, where their downfall is predicted and many in great detail. We can also find prophecies about the long expected Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ and about the Kingdom of God. There are also prophecies about important Old Testament leaders.

In the New Testament the prophecies generally focus on (as the Messiah had now come) the Kingdom of God and the time leading up to it. There are also warnings about the destruction of Jerusalem an event that happened in AD 70. Finally, as already noted, the book of Revelation is a special case, dealing with the long time period from the first century and ending with Christ as King in Jerusalem – the capital of the Kingdom of God.

#### THE DIVINE ORIGIN OF BIBLE PROPHECY

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to Timothy in which he reminded him that the Bible record is from God:

‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

*[2 Timothy 3:16,17]*

By reading and applying this inspired message we can improve ourselves and we can then please God by our actions. The prophet Jeremiah wrote that he could not resist speaking and recording the prophetic words of God as they were in his heart ‘*like a burning fire shut up in my bones*’ *[Jeremiah 20.9]*. All the prophetic writings and visions make it very clear these are God’s words, as they start with phrases like ‘*The word of the LORD came to me ...*’

Peter wrote in his second letter that the Gospel records and the 1<sup>st</sup>

century letters were not '*cunningly devised fables*' [2 Peter 1.16] and the proof is that Jesus came to fulfil the many prophecies about himself. Peter wrote:

'We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as to a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit' [2 Peter 1:19-21].

Jesus confirms the accuracy of the Old Testament prophecies by fulfilling them to the letter. There are many prophecies about Jesus – his birth, his mission, his death, his burial, his resurrection and his role in the future – far too many to cover in this article.

#### UNDERSTANDING BIBLE PROPHECY

Many prophecies in the Bible are straightforward and easily understood. In the Old Testament, these often commence with: '*The word of the LORD came to me, saying...*' There are direct references to the person or nation involved and then the details of what will happen are clearly described in simple language. Surprisingly few give us the details of precisely when the events will happen. In most cases, the prophecy would come true within a year or two, even though at the time the prophecy was given, the events were, from a human point of view, very unlikely to happen, unexpected or simply thought to be impossible. These prophecies are simple to approach and understand.

Other prophecies use special terms like '*the time of the end*' or '*the last days*' meaning the period of history immediately before the return of Christ, the judgment and the start of the Kingdom. This is a clear indication about the time period referred to in the predictions that follow.

There are many different poetic terms used to refer to the Jewish people, the land of Israel, its capital city Jerusalem (Zion) and the fact that they are God's chosen people. The only way to become familiar with these poetic terms is to read your Bible completely and compare similar references and their context.

The Christadelphians recommend the use of the Bible Companion, a Bible reading plan that during the course of a year enables you to read the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice. By following this plan you can become more familiar with the whole Bible. This helps a great deal in the understanding of Bible prophecy (send for your free copy to our correspondence secretary – address on inside back cover).

However, some prophecies are written accounts of visions or dreams given to the prophets by God. These are found mainly in the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation. In these visions we have a very strange world of symbols, beasts, precious materials, relationships, events and conversations. To make sense of these chapters, they first need interpreting – so the underlying meaning of the symbols needs to be understood.

Again the keys to unlocking many of these symbols are to be found in the Bible record itself. In the last chapter of Revelation we are told '*Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book*' [Revelation 22.7]. Looking into these prophecies is good for us as it keeps us studying our Bibles, looking for their fulfilment in historical events and for the fulfilment of prophecies that may happen in our own lifetimes and indicate to us the imminent return of Jesus to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

#### THE 'SO WHAT?' TEST

Having established that there are many prophecies in the Bible which stretch from the early chapters of Genesis to the last page of Revelation and that Jesus himself was a major prophet, perhaps we should ask ourselves – how does that affect me? What is the point?

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